

# **DEALING WITH DAEMONS**

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis project is a creative fiction novella titled *Dealing with Daemons* with a critical introduction discussing the history of the genre, the history of the vampire, current criticisms of the genre, and specific relations between the genre and my academic interests in English and Philosophy. In its broadest sense, the genre my narrative falls under is young adult (YA) fantasy. More specifically, it is a teen paranormal romance. As the title suggests, my novella will feature more paranormal activity than that of vampires; it will also include angels and daemons. The hero and heroine are vampires, but their predicament deals with daemons and dominions (angels).

Of the angels and daemons, one might be considered a main character—Athan Levi (Leviathan), a prince of hell and its gatekeeper. Danica is the heroine and first person narrator. She is what is known as a damphyr—half vampire and half human. Dimitri is a full vampire and Danica's love interest. Dimitri and Danica have a debt to pay Athan for protecting Danica from the dominions the day she was born. Their mission is to retrieve escaped supernatural souls that have returned to earth through the vestibules of liminal creatures such as ravens, foxes, and cats. The targeted audience is (mainly female) young adults, but my hope is for a broader readership including adults who enjoy fantasy fiction as well. I would like both younger and older audiences to feel entertained and intellectually stimulated by the philosophical dilemmas.

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I would also like to convey my appreciation to friends and family who have read and supported my stories throughout the lengthy process of getting them from my imagination to paper, especially my mother, who read my first novel in pieces I brought home every Friday one summer, and Lauren Bielski who mused with me, wrote with me, and inspired me with her own creative works of the imagination. Without those mentioned above and many more, this would not have been possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Young adult (YA) fiction has rapidly increased in popularity in the last decade. YA fiction is typically written for an audience of 12-18 years of age, but is often read by adults as well. What makes a book YA is not always the same. Many believe it is the intent that matters in labeling a book YA, while focus more on content. Generally, if a book is written with young adults as its intended audience, it is YA. Yet, some books, *Pride and Prejudice* for example, were not written for young adults, but have nevertheless developed a major readership among 13-15-year-old girls.

As the genre of YA fantasy continues to expand, new subgenres are appearing on the scene. Sometimes these genres are a result of a particular series reaching enormous success, which makes it possible for authors and presses to market work through generic association with that series. The genre of paranormal romance seems to be a perfect example of this phenomenon because many attribute its rapidly increasing popularity to the success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga. Some scholars suggest, however, that paranormal romance is not a new genre, but rather the revival of an older one with a new name.

In *The Twilight of the Gothic? Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance*, Joseph Crawford follows the history of the romance novel and the history of the gothic novel until the emergence of the gothic romance in 18<sup>th</sup> century literature. In his chapter titled "The First 800 Years," Crawford begins mapping the historical development of paranormal romance with the origins of the romance novel, which

originally meant simply that it was written in a provincial vernacular of Latin that was then called “romans” and is now called French. Any literary work written in the “romans” language was named for its language as a “romance,” and since all serious theological work was done in Latin, a romance tended to be less serious songs and stories of old heroes.<sup>1</sup> Romance literature of the medieval period included the supernatural and the fantastical. There was no divide between romance and the paranormal.

The drift from one into two occurred in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Crawford, it came with the success of novels such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Richardson’s *Pamela*, which told stories of love and adventure by means of ordinary and realistic heroes and heroines living present-day lives. The popularity of such novels gave way to the social understanding that the literature of the past, with all of its fantasies and superstitions, had been displaced by the more realistic, virtuous and educational novels of the present. Crawford suggests this displacement is remarkable with regard to the separation of fancy and romance, “It was in this context that the love story, the adventure story and the supernatural ‘wonder tale’ first started to come adrift from one another, after centuries of being united within the capacious boundaries of the old romance form.”<sup>2</sup> The widespread denunciation of the old romance form for its unrealistic nature was what Crawford considers a “cultural eclipse, from which it has

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<sup>1</sup> Crawford, *The Twilight of the Gothic?*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 13.

never fully emerged.”<sup>3</sup> Eclipsed is an apt description, because it never fully disappeared either.

During this initial eclipse of fantasy, the new realistic romance form shone brightly. Novels, as these love stories with new elements of realism and social education were called, continued to thrive throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the turn of the century saw what we now refer to as the Gothic revival. The Gothic revival meant a renewal of interest in everything having to do with the medieval period, including old romance novels. It incentivized publishers to once again refer to some works as ‘romances’ and promote the literature we discuss today as Gothic and/or romantic. The most well-known nineteenth-century literature, of course, would still have been referred to only as novels. We might now consider Jane Austen’s novels to be romantic novels, but she would only have thought of herself to be writing a novel. Yet, from Crawford’s contemporary perspective, 19<sup>th</sup> century literature from Austen to the Brontës and Byron offered enough Gothic novels and romantic novels for twentieth and twenty-first century readers to start naming them as such, blurring the lines into that of the gothic romance.<sup>4</sup>

While the idea that love and romance or particular kinds of love stories could be a distinct genre slowly unraveled over a few decades in the twentieth century, today’s genre of fantasy fiction began to take its shape around 1900.<sup>5</sup> Crawford sees the twentieth-century’s interests in the nineteenth-century gothic romance as an interest that spurred on the movement toward the modern gothic romance, emerging with Anne

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 23, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 38.

Rice's vampire novels featuring the blending of Byronic [vampires born in previous centuries] and the present day.<sup>6</sup> The modern gothic romance created a pathway to the paranormal romance and teen paranormal romance genres of the twenty-first century. Crawford explains in his introduction that his inspiration for writing the book and working through the first 800 years of a genre study was his baffled amusement at the cultural eclipse of the paranormal romance genre, just like the one upon the old romance before it.<sup>7</sup> After all, Meyer's *Twilight* has received as much criticism as it has praise.

The history of the vampire novel is more sporadic than the history of the paranormal romance provided by Crawford. In their introduction to *The Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature*, Leonard Heldreth and Mary Pharr postulate that "Vampires may lie hidden for centuries, but periodically they emerge from the darkness of the world's imagination into folklore, literature, and media."<sup>8</sup> Literature's first vampire was in John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, originally published in 1819 in a magazine as "A Tale by Lord Byron."<sup>9</sup> Polidori was a physician to Lord Byron, whose novel would have actually been the first vampire novel if he hadn't left it unfinished. Byron's outline for the novel provided the basis for Polidori's tale, which was published as a novella titled *The Vampyre* in the same year.<sup>10</sup> Polidori's contribution marked the beginning of vampire literature published in English, but perhaps Byron and Polidori each have a share in the creation of the vicious vampire Lord Ruthven, who is now considered the great-grandfather of the evasive aristocratic vampire of today's fiction. In any case,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Heldreth and Pharr, *The Blood is the Life*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Crawford, *The Twilight of the Gothic?*, 27.



Lord Ruthven arose from the ashes of the vampires of folklore and made way for the coming of *Dracula*.

The name *vampire* is an etymological enigma, so establishing what actually can be classified as vampire folklore is enigmatic as well. Generally, the natural history of the vampire is mapped onto demonology. Choosing to refine the history of the vampire to where the name actually came potentially narrows the scope to four main sources. According to Katharina Wilson, “There are four schools of thought on the etymology of ‘vampire’ advocating, respectively, Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, and Hungarian roots for the term.”<sup>11</sup> In its most open and loose forms of the demonic and the cannibalistic, vampire folklore has been traced back to ancient Greek mythology, Judaism, the Romans, and the Mesopotamian religion. Interestingly enough, the etymological and demonic roots of the vampire are perfectly aligned. Lamia was one of Zeus’ mistresses before she was turned into a child-eating demon by Zeus’ wife Hera. Lamia turned out to be the beginning of a long chain of female demons, many whose names also start with ‘L.’ Lilitu is a female demon in the Mesopotamian religion who is thought to be the predecessor for the Jewish Lilith, who is associated with a mix of demonic and bestial qualities.<sup>12</sup> Such biblical and mythological figures are often said to be the founding mothers of vampire folklore, but it is difficult to see the leap from demonic legends to the mass hysteria of animated corpses throughout eighteenth-century Europe.

The hysteria Transylvania is famous for was widespread across Europe and even made its way to the United States in the early nineteenth-century. It seems more

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson, *The History of the Word Vampire*, 577.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *Encyclopedia of Monsters*, 271-274.

plausible to connect the hysteria to the numerous plague epidemics throughout preceding centuries than to demonic figures, but perhaps it is all connected. What we do know of the hysteria is that it involved a deep and pervasive obsession with corpses. Digging up corpses, stabbing corpses, and burning corpses became common practices thought to ward off their evils. Whatever the hysteria was, it meant that many eighteenth-century Europeans believed in and feared the vampire—an animated, demonic corpse that absconded from its grave at night and sucked the blood from the living.<sup>13</sup> This hysteria unwittingly set the stage for the nineteenth-century European vampire, the seductive aristocrat, which set the stage for the twentieth-century antagonistic hero of Anne Rice's novels, which set the stage for the twenty-first vampire.

Twenty-first century vampires, such as Edward Cullen of *Twilight*, have moved almost entirely away from vampire folklore. They are stronger and more attractive than ever. They also have fewer weaknesses and are better at blending in with humans. Strength and speed are consistent features of the contemporary vampire. It would be difficult to find a recent paranormal romance with a vampire whose physical abilities were not exceptional. At least half of contemporary vampires will also feature superior mental capacities. Authors of the last decade's young adult vampire novels tend to pick and choose weaknesses, but generally do not ascribe more than a couple of folklore weaknesses to their vampires.

Occasionally, as in the Sookie Stackhouse novels, vampires are still afflicted by silver or stakes or both. There are variations of how vampires are killed and authors

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<sup>13</sup> Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*.

seem to take their pick of an assortment of ways. The most common way the contemporary vampire is killed is by a stake through the heart. The runners up are beheading and fire. Of the various aversions vampires from previous centuries have been known to have, daylight is the most common among contemporary literary vampires. Garlic and mirrors no longer seem to trouble vampires at all. Overall, the twenty-first century has become more powerful and less limited.

The vampires of my thesis fall in line for the most part with the new tradition of vampires. They are strong, fast, and beautiful. They have no aversions, however, not even daylight. They are nocturnal, but they can go out into the daylight without being harmed. They are simply more active at night. This nocturnal aspect is unusual, but not unique, for example vampires are so in the House of Night series by P.C. Cast. My vampires are unique in the way they can be killed. They can only be killed by starvation. The only thing they need to continue to exist is human blood. Otherwise, they cannot be killed. If a vampire died after being beheaded, the main cause of death would be starvation. If a vampire was buried underground long enough, it would die of starvation. In a sense, there are many ways my vampires could die, but they would all be means to the end of starvation.

I cannot speak for all authors of the twenty-first vampire, but the reason my vampires are so limitless is because the more powerful and evolved they are, the more they have to philosophize on what to do with their power and almost unlimited experience. I find vampires fascinating because they invite readers to wonder what they might do if they had already attained wealth, immortality, and physical perfection. It

makes a reader think about how much time human beings put into the struggle for physical health and material wealth. It might make them wonder what would become important once those basic projects were completed. After that, the project of a human being becomes more abstract. I would like my young readers to think about what is important to them aside from beauty and materials. I would like them to consider what kind of goals they might set for themselves if they had multiple lifetimes to work toward them.

Scholars in the field suggest that the perfection of the vampire has a lot to do with the romance. Most scholarship on young adult vampire literature features *Twilight* as its primary text. Before *Twilight*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was of mainstream scholarly interest and still makes an appearance from time to time. Scholarship on twilight mainly focuses on themes of religion, gender, sex, and violence. Titles such as “Pure Passion: The Twilight Saga, ‘Abstinence Porn,’ and Adolescent Women’s Fan Fiction,” by Sara Day can be found in numbers, especially since the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* which was *Twilight* fan fiction originally. Much attention is given to the fact that *Twilight* author, Stephenie Meyer, is Mormon and scholars such as Georgina Ledvinka who wrote “Vampires and Werewolves: Rewriting Religious and Racial Sterotyping in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series” are interested in potential LDS influenced structures found in her works.

Perhaps the most common theme of scholarship on *Twilight* and the contemporary young adult vampire novel is sexual violence. Renae Franiuk who wrote “‘The Lion Fell in Love with the Lamb’: Gender, Violence, and Vampires” is not alone

in her interpretation of *Twilight*'s Edward Cullen's well-known declaration to Bella that he is like the lion who fell in love with the lamb. She is interested not only in Edward's relationship with Bella, but more generally the violent love affairs in paranormal romance. Borgia Danielle discusses a similar concern in "Twilight: The Glamorization of Abuse, Codependency, and White Privilege." Bella's codependency makes her a popularly questionable character as a female role model for scholars in fields of gender studies. Feminists frequently disagree on praise and criticism for *Twilight* and for Bella as a role model, so there is starting to be a trend of scholarship undertaking the study of why feminists either love or hate it, for example Anne Peterson's "That Teenage Feeling: Twilight, Fantasy, and Feminist Readers."

My writing is very much influenced by contemporary young adult fiction, including *Twilight*, but I have also always been drawn to nineteenth-century literature, especially its Gothic poems and novels. I have recently taken an interest in the work of Byron and Coleridge and have long admired Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Mary Shelley. As an undergraduate, I researched Charlotte Smith at length and spent many afternoons in the library reading her *Conversations Introducing Poetry* on microfilm. Her sonnets are what first drew me to her writing, but then I became fascinated with her meta-pedagogical novel for teaching children through poetry and walks in nature. As a graduate student, the novel I chose to research in a course on children's literature was *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell. Perhaps I find Crawford's study of the genre convincing because it connects my interests in Victorian romantic, gothic, and young adult literature to my current pursuits in writing YA paranormal romance.

I have to draw my own connection to my interests in nineteenth-century American literature, but that is easy because the American authors I am most interested in and have done work on are Edgar Allen Poe and William Faulkner. Poe is known for the supernatural and for corpses that do not stay dead. Blood and death, especially murder, are as prominent in Poe as in any vampire literature. Though a reader might infer a rational explanation for such events as the risen dead (e.g., live burials or the narrator's insanity), supernatural sensibilities remain present in Poe's works. Faulkner, on the other hand, is not known for supernatural scenes. Yet, my favorite of his works, *As I Lay Dying*, allows a dead woman to speak, to narrate her thoughts as her body is transported to her designated burial spot.

Coming from a background in philosophy, it may seem strange that I chose to do a creative thesis, but my specific interests in philosophy actually have a lot to do with my interests in YA fantasy. I am fascinated by the imagination and firmly believe in its moral capabilities. I am interested in aesthetics, especially with regard to the creative process and the relationship between authors or artists and their creations. My studies rarely stray too far from gender studies and inquiries. Perhaps most importantly, the kind of project I would like to promote in the future is a philosophy for young adults program. There are many movements for philosophy for children around the world. I would like to initiate a program specifically tailored to young adults using young adult fiction. Just as *Sophie's World* has successfully helped ease a number of young adults into the introduction of the history of philosophy, talking about philosophy in

conjunction with books about vampires, zombies, and dystopias could be successful as well.

My studies in philosophy have introduced me to a vast array of philosophical and political utopias that inform the way I read today's YA fiction. There are moral dilemmas, gender ideologies, and existential quandaries to be found in the books young adults are *choosing* to read. John Dewey tells us that education is growth and that we find growth where there is interest. There is interest for young adults in YA fiction. YA fiction appeals to their level of inquiry. It is not that they are too young or unable to ask questions about life, death, and meaning. Their interests are simply expressed and grasped differently than those of adults, but within the scope of their interests, they can express and grasp complex themes of philosophy.

My interests in young adult fiction and in philosophy are not disparate entities. Sometimes they are so intertwined it is difficult to present them to others separately. I doubt I could ever write a creative piece of fiction without finding some moment in the narrative that was inspired by something I had read in my philosophical studies. In the same respect, doing creative work allows me to play with my philosophical ideas in more palpable ways. I realized that none of this is surprising once I spent time working with political utopias. After all, the reason one creates a utopian fiction is to illustrate the complexities and intricacies involved in a political system. Similarly, the task of character development is essentially an illustration of the complexities and intricacies of the human being, even if the main character is not completely human.

Connections between fantasy and philosophy are not uncommon, and the use of popular young adult fiction novels for such connections is a growing project. Titles such as *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality* and *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: A New Life for the Undead* are starting to make textbook lists for first year seminars at universities. The first title features chapters by established writers of philosophy of pop culture, each taking up different philosophical aspects and questions regarding Meyer's portrayal of vampires, love, and death in *Twilight*. The first chapter was contributed by George Dunn, a lecturer at the University of Indianapolis who has published a number of works on the philosophy of pop culture such as *The Hunger Games and Philosophy*, *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy*, and *True Blood and Philosophy*. His chapter on *Twilight* begins with an epigraph from Friedrich Nietzsche, discusses the analogy of food with regard to love and madness in *Twilight*, and seeks to dissect the various meanings implied in Edward's use of his love/food analogy when he tells Bella he is like the lion that fell in love with the lamb.<sup>14</sup> This kind of use for vampires as analogies of various aspects of life and death is what draws me to their stories and inspires me to create my own.

My creative thesis features a young woman named Danica whose life has recently been significantly altered, since she has learned that she lives in a world with vampires and werewolves and that she is a unique hybrid supernatural. She continues to learn new things about her new life and birth once she is kidnapped by a powerful daemon prince who had claimed her soul when she was just an infant. She also learns of

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<sup>14</sup> Dunn, "You Look Good Enough to Eat: Love, Madness, and the Food Analogy", 7-23.



the involvement of her mother, father, and vampire beau in her debt to the daemon prince. This particular story is about her first mission for repaying that debt by capturing the souls that escaped from the prince's gates, souls which happen to seek Danica's death. To conclude this introduction and illuminate the story, I will provide a sketch of each of the main characters and a brief synopsis.

Gretsch Danica Daniels is the novel's heroine and the only first person narrator. Danica is a damphyr (half-vampire/half-human) whose mother (Delia) left her with her human father, Preston, shortly after she was born. In *Dealing with Daemons*, she has known about her vampire roots for about two months and has been honing her unique talent for reading the thoughts of others in addition to the more typical capabilities of vampires (extreme speed, night vision, superior strength, and quick healing). She has fallen deeply in love with the vampire Dimitri, who trained her to use her powers and to drink her own blood without destroying the human part of her. She is on the verge of turning twenty. Her hair is bright red/auburn. Her naturally thin, partly human body has become stronger and more athletic looking than most humans and most vampires since her vampire training has shaped her human body.

Dimitri is the novel's male protagonist and love interest who occasionally takes on the role of a limited third person narrator. Dimitri is a fully-fledged, century old vampire. He is 6'2" with dark hair, grey eyes, and a lean build. The vampire that turned him into a vampire also turned Danica's mother, Delia. They were "raised together" in the same household. Their long-term relationship is the reason Dimitri is involved in Danica's life. He never intended to fall in love with her, but since his particular gift is

being a muse for the special talents of other vampires and acquiring bits of those gifts for himself, he knew the moment he saw Danica as an infant that she possessed a special gift and was intrigued by her existence ever since.

Delia is Danica's mother and also an occasional third person narrator. Delia never wanted to be a vampire. She has carried a deep resentment for herself, her kind, and her creator for nearly a century. The love of her life is a human named Preston Daniels who fathered her daughter, Danica. She is a stunningly beautiful redhead with golden eyes and skin as pure and light as porcelain. Her allegiance with the angels resulted from her desire to die in order to rid herself of an existence she deemed unworthy until an angel offered her a particular form of salvation. Her angel allies did not approve of her relationship with Preston and feared her child would be an abomination, so they insisted she deliver Danica to them as soon as she was born. She had decided to do so, but Dimitri and Athan (a prince of hell) ruined her plans. Instead, she went back to the Dominions (her angel allies) and told them Danica's soul had been claimed by Athan. They agreed to reinstate her position within their league on the condition that she terminate her relationship with Preston and abandon her child.

Athan Levi (Leviathan) is a prince of Hell—the Guardian of Supernatural Souls. Athan has the physical presence of young man around eighteen years old. He has an olive complexion, a closely shaved head with dirty blond hair, and scruffy facial hair that is slightly darker than the hair on his head. His interest in Danica began once he knew his rivals, the Dominions, were afraid of her. It only increased when he read Dimitri's thoughts and discovered how powerful the muse thought she could be. He

appears to have a sinister, yet playful nature, but in reality he is just tired. He regrets never having found a supernatural being, alive or dead, who could relieve him of his monotonous job—searching for lost souls and bringing them back. With Danica's power to read thoughts, he believes he has finally found someone worthy of being his right hand.

Delia begins the story by having a few reveries of the past as she reclines in an office chair, starting with her being turned into a vampire and ending with her turning to the Dominions (a choir of angels) for salvation. Present reality kicks in when Preston, her newly reinstated romantic partner, returns to his office. Her desire is to keep Preston from contacting Danica while she decides what to do about the fact that the Dominions have asked her to bring Danica to them as they once did when Danica was only an infant. He is very concerned about his daughter, but Delia is convincing and has the power to enter the dreams of others. Satisfied that she has subdued his urges to contact their daughter, Delia seeks Danica out by herself.

Dimitri and Danica are introduced first by Delia, but by the third chapter Danica takes on the first person narrative to explain her current predicament in hell and give the reader a taste of her relationship with Dimitri first hand. Dimitri and Danica have a debt to pay Athan for protecting Danica from the Dominions the day she was born. Their mission will be to retrieve two escaped supernatural souls. Escaped supernatural souls are able to return to earth only through the vestibules of liminal creatures such as ravens, foxes, and cats. Athan's power allows him to track from his palace the general whereabouts of the souls, but the only way to actually get them back is to go to their

general location and wonder the paths of liminal beings until he hears the thoughts of a supernatural. Danica's task is to do the retrieving, since she possesses similar powers of telepathy.

Having been warned by Athan that one of the souls they are retrieving is from Danica's past and the other is from Dimitri's, Danica and Dimitri set out to find them, kill their vestibules, and return their souls. Athan does not want to make it easy for them. He considers the mission a preliminary exercise for Danica. Athan's objective is to test her with the dramatic challenge of returning a soul that wishes her nothing but harm and death and throws in some extra obstacles along the way. With Dimitri's help, she is able to fight them and return them. In the meantime, conflict between the Dominions and Daemons is escalating, but that story is to be continued after *Dealing with Daemons*.

## PROLOGUE

*Perspective: Delia*

Delia tapped her painted red fingernails on the slender arms of the vintage chair in which she sat across from the mahogany desk that now belonged to her lover, Dr. Preston Daniels. Preston was a newly hired professor at Georgetown University. His transfer had been a direct result of her offer to resume their relationship if he was willing to move to Washington D.C. for her. She was pleased, albeit not surprised, that he had so eagerly agreed. Getting him a position had been just as easy. Delia possessed a rare and exquisite gift that allowed her to subliminally influence others. It was the only aspect of her supernatural existence she did not typically despise, though she occasionally allowed herself to relish her eternal beauty.

Her hair rivaled the lustrous red of a ruby, and her eyes were a dangerous blend of light browns and dark greens that offered the general impression of gold. Her skin was exceptionally fair and unblemished despite the many times she had suffered outrageous cuts, falls, and blows to every inch of her body. No matter what harm Delia subjected herself to, her body would appear as pure and perfect as porcelain the next morning. She despised herself for her resilience. She felt that bruises and scars marked a real kind of existence. Vampire life never felt real to Delia. She had felt as if she had been launched from her violent encounter with werewolves into a waking dream since the day she was turned. She no longer felt conscious of her existence. Nothing that happened to her ever felt like it really happened. For humans, certain experiences stay

close to consciousness because their effects are ever-present. As a vampire, Delia felt as if she were constantly drifting and dreaming. She'd punch a hole through a wall and the wall would be damaged, but her hand would not. She felt utterly detached from the world she was in. She could affect it, but it had no effect on her.

Her beauty she admired occasionally, but it gave her the same guilt and disconnected feelings. She kept living longer, but she did not really age. Age meant physical changes, but Delia hardly experienced real physical change as a vampire. Physical changes for vampires simply had to do with how much blood they required. They were either thirsty or sated. Those were their two states of existence. The only real connection she had with the world as a vampire revolved around feeding. When she fed, she felt an inkling of home. Blood tasted like peace. It made her feel as if she were in the world for a reason. She knew better than that once the high had worn off. She knew feeding from human beings made her a parasite. For decades Delia had thought there was no other way for her to exist. She believed her only two choices were to feed and attach herself to the world as a parasite or to bear her miserable disconnected existence as long as it took for her to die of starvation. She wavered, always trying to starve herself and never succeeding.

She probably could have when she was in her first years as a vampire if her household had not been so concerned. The hunger is not as strong for the young vampires as it is for the older, so her best chances of starving herself were early on. The man responsible for turning her into her living nightmare had turned a few young men before her, so she lived with her maker and his three male protégés. Of the protégés one

was kind, one was cruel, and the other was madly in love with her. Their maker was rarely seen in the household, though he frequently brought dinner home and insisted they eat as a family. Delia appreciated his absence more than she appreciated his dinner invitations, but it was not because he was unkind to her. He was always pleasant and he entertained her questions if ever she was willing to ask him something. He knew she was angry with him for turning her, but he did not seem to understand or even wish to learn why.

“Do you not see, Delia? He cares for each of us, but he is not our caretaker. He is our maker. He expects us to make something of his creation by our own accord. It is up to you to make something of your new existence. His part is past,” Dimitri had told her. He was the kind one, but his calm acceptance of their situation annoyed her. He was the only one who did not stand in her way of trying to destroy herself, though. Her maker made it difficult with his persistent family dinners. He was a doctor for humans and he would constantly bring home humans, either those for whom death was either or those who were in so much pain, they asked for it.

“Do you think this is honorable? Should we be proud of exploiting the fragility of human beings for our food?” Delia had asked her maker before dinner one night, subjecting him to the bitter hatred she felt for herself and any other being that fed only by taking the pulse of a more vulnerable being.

“No, Delia. It is not and we should not. We should, and I assure you I have, show gratitude as well as humility toward the life we are about to take,” he had told her, nodding at the sickly, barely conscious man lying on the damp wood floor.

“That is an absurd notion. I cannot imagine Delia being gracious or humble.”

Jonah had intruded on their conversation; he intruded on as many conversations as he could. Jonah had been against the idea of bringing a female vampire into their household and resented Delia, though she frequently assured him that she was as unhappy about it as he was. Nothing deterred Jonah from making a hateful remark any time Delia decided to speak, but he rarely made a second when Dimitri or Edgar were around. Dimitri and Edgar were both protective of Delia, but in different ways. When Jonah would send a foul comment Delia's way, Dimitri would shoot him a look that almost always put Jonah in his place. That was all Dimitri had to do. He was the oldest and the cleverest. Jonah never admitted it, but everyone knew that the only person Jonah was afraid of disappointing was Dimitri. So when Dimitri looked disappointed, Jonah backed off.

Edgar, on the other hand, was flashy about it. He would puff up his chest and take a few steps toward Jonah and say something like, “If you are going to say something ridiculous, say it to me. It will make me less angry if you say it to me than to Delia.” He wanted it to be clear that he was protecting her because he cared about her. He wanted everyone to know that he loved her. In those moments, she had loved him back, but then they would start to feed and then any feeling she thought she had of love was far surpassed by the moment of bliss when she felt really alive again. After that had worn off, she was left with emptiness and contempt for what she had done, and what she had seen Edgar do too. As long as he was a vampire, she could not love him back. Her hatred for him only grew when she would try to starve herself and he would not let her.



If ever she managed to evade dinner, he would bring her something the next day. He would watch her. He would fight her if he had to, but he would not let her kill herself. If ever she could get away from Edgar, Jonah always seemed to be lurking around the corner, eager to return her to Edgar. Jonah loved to put himself in the middle of their fight. It allowed him to torture Delia in a way that even Edgar could appreciate.

Many years passed before Jonah, Edgar, and Dimitri were out of the house and she was finally off their radar. Absent though he was, their maker had given them more than just a place to exist. He had given them training to exist incognito in a human world for centuries. During the years they spent in their maker's home, different trainers would come for months at a time to train the protégés to fight other super-naturals, to acquire skill sets for a multitude of human occupations, and to harness their individual dark gifts. Many vampires have a talent that surpasses the standard aptitudes that all vampires share. All vampires are able to run faster and farther than humans and even werewolves. They are nocturnal, though fully functional during the day. They are simply most active and their perceptions are most acute at night. Vampires see better at night and during the day than humans. They hear better, smell more, and have a heightened brain capacity since they store more in a lifetime. A dark gift, on the other hand, is special. Sometimes it is unique. As far as Delia knew, no other vampire possessed her gift to enter the subconscious minds of others through their most vivid of dreams. Actually, her presence made their dreams more vivid, hence they would enter into their conscious minds more readily.

Tapping into her gift was her only solace. Moving between realms of consciousness relieved her feeling of being stuck in a single nightmare because she could vacation out of her hellacious existence. Having the ability to enter the dreams of other beings might have distanced her from the human experience, but nonetheless it allowed her to share a realm of consciousness with them, whether they realized it or not. It was the only way she felt human even though she spent many years learning how to blend in with humans. She learned to play instruments, but the music felt different and it came so easily that there was no majesty in it. She learned medicine, but it only made her ache for the physical scars of time. Each of the protégés had been trained in such a way that they would eventually be able to leave the household feeling adequately prepared to live their lives pursuing various professions they enjoyed somewhat, to defend themselves from werewolves and other vampires, and to consume humans in a way that would not draw too much attention to them. Such were the preparations their maker offered, and all protégés but Delia seemed to think they were fair.

Delia understood their significance, but they were only significant for continuing her own wretched existence while keeping humans in the dark about the plague slowly wiping them out. That was not enough for Delia. She wanted to know why she should continue existing. It did not make sense to her to put all that time and effort into an existence that was so pestilent. She did not wish to pursue a human occupation or the façade of a human existence. All she could think of, once all three of her brotherly protégé companions had finally left the house, was that she could resume her attempt to starve herself, free of the men who had been watching her too closely before. To her

great pleasure, her master had become less present once she was the only one left in the house and no longer insisted on family dinners.

She grew weaker and weaker over time. Her suffering was great, but she took even greater delight in the physical signs of it. Finally, she had found a way to show the wounds of her spirit on her person. Her body became gaunt and frail looking. Her eyes had deep, dark circles underneath them and the whites of her eyes started looking watery, inflamed, and a pale yellow. One night, Delia was certain she had accomplished her goal. As she spewed blood and bile on the tile of her floor, she knew that death was approaching. She knew it because she had died before, having been attacked by four vicious werewolves. That had been a temporary death since her maker decided to rebirth her into a new, sub-human version of life. This time, she knew, she was finally facing a real death and she welcomed it with open arms. She felt relieved of her pain when a strong gust of wind forced her windows open and a bright burst of light shone upon her.

“Thank you,” she whispered to the light she hoped was only there to illuminate her path to death and darkness.

“You’re welcome,” the Angel sitting in the windowsill calmly replied.

“Pardon me?” Delia coughed and then clutched her abdomen as it twitched painfully.

“Sweet child. I will pardon you for everything if you’ll let me.” The Angel smiled and stepped down from the windowsill.

Delia recognized the figure as an Angel right out of medieval art. Its shape was the shape of a man, and a tall man at that. His dress resembled the traditional garb worn

by a Catholic priest. The fabric closest to his skin was white, but there was a grey-purple layer on top of it. A halo was obnoxiously apparent; it was as if his head was stuck in the yellow part of a rainbow. Delia was sure she was just hallucinating in the final moments before her death. It made her smile despite the pain that still felt very real because it reminded her of the kind of vivid dream she'd helped humans experience.

The Angel glided over to where Delia knelt next to a puddle of blood and bile and waved his hands over her and the puddle. Instantly, the puddle evaporated off the floor and her cheeks and chin felt clean and dry. He then sat down slowly on her bed and began to pet the top of her head as if she were a Labrador. "Why is it that you seek death, child?" he asked, continuing rhythmic strokes on her head.

"I'm no longer seeking it," she smiled and looked up at the angelic apparition on her bed. "It's coming to me. You are the flag on the horizon letting me know it's coming my way. Do not fret, vision of mine. You need not comfort or console me. I am ready."

"Child, you are right that you are on the brink of death. You are wrong that I am a vision or an announcement of its approach. I am here to change your mind and offer you salvation."

Delia suddenly wished she were not so weak. "Get out of here, devil in disguise!" she shouted as she tried to tear through the appearance of the ghost, but he felt fleshy and real. He grabbed her hands tightly and held them together. She squirmed, but it was no use. He had her arms completely constrained and she had little strength left in her legs to try to kick or stand.

“Please calm down and listen to me, child. I’ve been watching you for a very long time. I’ve seen you repent. I’ve seen you fast. I’ve seen how much you regret what you are. I want to offer you a lifetime of repentance and an eternity of salvation for what you are and what you have done. You do not have to choose between dying and living a life of sin. I can help you live a life of virtue.”

“You cannot. No one can. It is an impossible choice I face, but I have chosen! Let me be,” she sobbed loudly, “Let me die. Please. Why is it no one will simply let me die?” Her sobbing seemed to convince the Angel he could let go of her wrists and she reacted by curling into a fetal position on the floor and quietly crying, wishing death would hurry up.

The Angel stood over her and for the first time let his wings span to their full length as he said in an audible, but low-pitched tone, “You know not what I am capable of, but I believe in what you could do. Stop your foolish whimpering and come with me.” With that, he cradled her pitiful body in his arms and flew out the window with her. She wanted to fight, but she was too weak, so she closed her eyes and prayed that it was just a strange encounter with death.

“Is that the German Empire?” Delia asked the Angel groggily when she finally found the strength and the will to open her eyes and look down.

“Why yes, it is, child,” the Angel’s voice sounded clear, surprisingly clear for someone traveling so quickly by air, Delia thought. “Do you see that castle?”

Delia squinted, but soon realized there was no need. They were getting closer and closer to a beautiful castle that appeared as if it were built into a mountaintop. It

was earth-toned, which is why she could not see it easily at first, but once she identified it, the spires were unmistakable and she could not look away. She stared at its beauty until she and the Angel landed inside its gates.

Delia wondered if the Angel would put her down and expect her to walk. She was not sure she would be able. She thought it miraculous that she could continue to feel weaker by the moment since each moment felt as if she could not possibly be in a worse physical condition. The Angel must have known because he walked into the castle without loosening his grip on her a bit, not even when he began ascending a wooden spiral staircase.

When they reached the top, he called for someone in Latin. Delia knew Latin better than most, but still could not comprehend what was being said. It sounded like Latin, but different from the Latin she knew. Without hesitating for a response, the Angel took her into a room. The room had plain walls and dark wood floors as far as Delia could see, and there was a crushed velvet chaise lounge in the middle of it, where the Angel gently set her down. When she looked up at the ceiling, she noticed that it was far more decorated than the wall. There were figures carved into the beams and paintings of Angels that looked just like the one kneeling beside her.

Suddenly, there were two of them kneeling beside her. Delia closed her eyes and opened them again, hoping the double image would come together. She was not surprised her vision was faulty, but it was strange to her that it was taking so long for her to regain focus. She blinked and blinked and blinked, but the two identical images remained separate. She was about to give up and close her eyes with the intention of

never opening them again when she saw one of the Angels at her side pass the other a bottle of wine. The one receiving the bottle nodded to the other and then the other left quickly. Delia was flabbergasted at the identical twins, but lacked the strength to comment about it.

“Delia, drink this. It will be just enough for you to be well as long as it will take for me explain how I wish to remove you from this depression into a state of existence where you will find fulfillment.” He brought the bottle to Delia’s lips.

“Nooo,” Delia moaned, trying to bring her hand up to smack the drink away but failing to do so quickly enough to catch the Angel off guard.

“Please, Delia,” the Angel said firmly.

“How do you know my name? No. It does not... No. NO. NO. NO.”

“Very well.” He snapped his fingers and before she knew what was happening her mouth was open and she could not close it.

Warm, thick liquid poured into her mouth and ran down the sides of her cheeks. She did her best to prevent it from going down her throat. *Good.* She thought. *Let them choke me. Fine. Just let me die already. Let it be.* But her throat would not listen. Despite her will, she felt her tongue reaching toward the air for a quicker taste of every drop and she began to swallow quicker than the liquid came. It was never wine in the bottle. It was blood—the sweetest blood Delia had ever tasted. With every swallow came strength and restoration to her body.

“More!” she pleaded when the Angel stopped pouring.

“Come with me, child. I will offer you more than you ever imagined.”

“I’m sorry to make you wait, beautiful.” Preston’s words snapped Delia out of her reverie of things past. He strode into the room wearing the new ensemble she’d purchased and laid out for him earlier that morning. He bent over to kiss her gently on the cheek before kneeling to meet her eyes.

“Oh it was no problem at all,” She smiled and he swooned. He was so easy to make happy. He made her feel that all he wanted in the world was to see her smile.

“I was trying to get a hold of Gretsch and Dimitri. Tell me again, what happened when you saw them? I know she called me after you spoke, but I’m just wondering...” His smile faded into a look of concern. He was upset because their daughter, Gretsch as he called her, Danica as Delia had properly named her, had fallen in love with Delia’s fellow protégé Dimitri, and young, naïve Danica was, to say the least, not pleased by the suggestion that she leave her newfound romance to go to school at Georgetown and live with her newly reunited parents.

The thought of Dimitri entertaining a relationship with her daughter was a bit shocking to Delia, but she had always felt he bore a strange interest in the child. Preston claimed he had asked Dimitri to stand by and be her guardian when the time came, but Delia still found it peculiar that Dimitri would agree. He was always kind, but he rarely committed to anyone or anything for so long. Perhaps he had finally realized he was going to live forever and that commitment was only temporary when dealing with humans. In any case, Dimitri’s level of commitment was unintelligible to Delia. By playing muse to Danica, he had developed the ability to block intruders in his mind, thwarting Delia’s ability to enter his dreams. Delia proceeded to return her attention to



Preston and answer him with caution. “They were fine. She was upset, but it was nothing. Darling, relax. They probably were fighting when I left, took a break from each other, and now they’re either breaking up or making up. These things take time, but you will be the first person she calls when she makes her decision. I’m sure of it! Until then, you just have to give her space. Trust me.” She smiled at him again, this time with her lips a little pursed to make him remember how much he wanted her.

He leaned in to kiss her lips swiftly and softly. “You’re right. Thank you, gorgeous. Let’s get out of here. I’m starving.” He stood and extended a hand to her. She took it and continued to hold it as they walked out of his office and into the hallway.

She feigned interest in his ramblings about meeting his new colleagues as she plotted her next move. Normally she wouldn’t have to fake interest at all. She actually felt a great deal of interest in how he was getting along with his colleagues at Georgetown. She simply had too much else to think about that evening. The daughter that she, a vampire, shared with Preston, a human man, for instance. That Damphyr-Halfling daughter of hers was creating the same trouble for Delia’s relationship with Preston that she had caused almost twenty years before when she was first born.

Danica had gotten herself kidnapped by the most dreadful creatures in all of existence, the Daemons. Delia had made a terrible mistake the night she was born. She let a Daemon prince claim her daughter so that she wouldn’t have to take her away from Preston, thus ending their relationship. Her faithful companions, the Dominions, had wanted Danica for themselves, but in the end Delia was unable and unwilling to take Danica from her father and deliver her to the Dominions. The Dominions were her

guardian Angels. They had saved her life, but more than that, they had given her a reason to live. They had given her the lifetime fulfillment of sacred repentance. Everything she did for them gave her instant satisfaction. She finally felt connected to the world, even more so than she had as a human. They gave her the chance to make her existence matter. She owed them everything for it.

She had been selfish and foolish before with her child and she had lost Preston anyway. The Dominions had punished her, rightfully so, for her betrayal by not allowing her to continue a relationship with her child or the child's father. Now she had the chance to make everything right. If she could just get Danica to choose to be on her side with the Dominions, she could have a relationship with Preston and Danica while serving her beloved Angels.

"What do you think, Delia?" Preston asked as his fingers slipped away from hers so that he could place his right hand on the small of her back while he held the door with his left.

"Excellent choice, dear! I love their duck," Delia replied as she moved through the small doors into the quaint French restaurant. As they followed their hostess just a few steps toward a table near the front of the restaurant and sat down, Delia determined exactly how she would get Preston out of the way so she could go deal with their daughter.

"Preston," she immediately began running her fingers through her hair because it always got his attention, "I know I told you not to worry about it, but I was just thinking that maybe what Danica needs is a little time to process everything. Perhaps she could

come here and intern with my company. That would give her a year to test her relationship with Dimitri, take a class or two at Georgetown to see how she likes it, and spend some time getting used to us being together. What do you think?”

Preston shifted in his seat, cleared his throat, took a drink, and then cleared his throat again. “Delia, sweetheart, I like the idea of an internship, but why with your company? It has nothing to do with psychology.”

She let her fingers move from her hair down to the nape of her neck and let them linger there as she replied, “But, my dear, it has everything to do with criminals, and did you not once say she might have a leaning toward criminal psychology?”

“Well, yes, but...she isn’t sure. She needs to study more before she picks a concentration,” he responded as if speaking to his menu, avoiding eye contact with Delia.

“That is the problem with academia. These children are supposed to know what they want to do with their lives because of what they read in books and discuss in class. It is ridiculous, Preston. They should do rotational internships to find their knacks and then study whatever it might be. It makes no sense to choose by study and then force oneself into a box of experience that may not be an appropriate fit. Let her find a concentration through actual field experience! It is the best thing you can possibly do for her right now.” She allowed her leg to graze his as she finished her argument in her sincerest tone of voice.

He allowed himself to meet her eyes for a moment only before looking back down at his menu. “You might be right, Delia, but that isn’t exactly how things are

done. I like your idea, but I'd like to propose a friendly amendment." He took a small sip of his water, clasped her fingers in his, and finally met her eyes intently. "I think we should let her decide what she wants to do this year and suggest the internship for the summer. What do you think about that?"

Feeling slightly defeated, but still hopeful, Delia shrugged her shoulders and nodded. "Of course, darling. You know best. OH! Before I forget, I must tell you that I'll be leaving on business first thing in the morning."

"Oh? But you just got back from seeing Gretsche in Arizona a few days ago. I wish you would take some time off of traveling before the semester starts." His eyes shined bright through his glasses, even with the glare from the candle on their table.

"It will be a short trip. I promise. But that reminds me; I have one quick call to make about arrangements. Order the duck for me?" She heard him sigh as she left the table to book a flight to Utah, where her devious daughter was in trouble with the Daemons of Prince Athan Levi's castle. It was going to be an awful trip traveling as the humans did. She so preferred traveling by Angel.

## CHAPTER I SO, WHAT'S THE DEAL?

*Perspective: Danica*

I lifted my feet from the floor and positioned myself cross-legged on the couch because the heat from the floor was becoming unbearable. *The grounds of Hell are neither kind to souls nor soles*, I thought. Athan stood before Dimitri and me, looking as though he might actually tell us exactly what we were going to have to do for him to repay the debt Dimitri owed him for saving my life. It even seemed as though whatever it was, it was going to explain why three crows had attacked me on the road while I was driving with the top down in my Mini Cooper Convertible.

“Three supernatural souls escaped from my gates a few nights ago. I had a hunch they were on their way to one of you when I tracked their location. My suspicions were confirmed when I found them attacking you on the road. You sent one of them back by the way. Thanks for that.” Athan’s hazel eyes moved from mine to his chest as he chuckled. His chuckle was the kind that exerted his shoulders more than his voice.

I listened to Athan carefully despite my awful hangover from being inside Dimitri’s drug-induced dream-like memory. Simply seeing Dimitri holding me as an infant and my mom ready to hand me over to some group called the Dominions who were probably going to kill me was enough to give me a headache and a bit of nausea, but I also felt like the mental activity of going into that memory with the powerful influence of Athan being in there with me was mind melting. I felt more mentally

fatigued than school had ever made me. My temples burned the way my muscles burned when I used to exercise as a human.

Still, I wanted to be involved in the conversation and follow Athan's instructions completely. The pain I was feeling from the memory served as a reminder that Athan had saved me from my mother and her companions as a favor to Dimitri. Now we needed to return the favor or else...well, I didn't really want to ask, but Athan's power seemed pretty limitless.

I chimed in before he could continue. "Wait, what do you mean? I thought *you* were the ravens attacking me on the road. Why else did you show off your ability to turn into a raven earlier? This whole time I have assumed you were the ravens that made me run my Mini Cooper off the road so that you could appear in my back seat, scare the hell out of me, and hijack my car and bring me here. You're telling me that was all some weird coincidence?"

He smiled, and for the first time I noticed his dimples. It drove me crazy how sweet and innocent his appearance was. He paced a few steps closer until I was in his reach so he could place two fingers on each of my temples. His fingers felt warm, but with the warmth came a feeling of instant relief. The pressure and pounding subsided, leaving me feeling a little light-headed, but overall much better.

I had wanted to thank him and ask him my question again, but all that came out was a quizzical, "Whoa. Thanks?"

"You're welcome," he said as he stood over me, making me tilt my chin up to see his face. "I thought you might need a little help to start thinking straight again

because what you asked was a little ridiculous. If you recall, you killed one of those ravens. Don't you think that if I had taken the form of a few ravens and you threw a dagger through one that it would have harmed me in some way?"

"I stuck a dagger in you and nothing happened, remember?" I suddenly regretted reminding him of that...

"True," he nodded with a cocky smile, "But you did harm that raven and you know it. It was dead and it remained dead when I was in your presence."

"Okay, fine. Whatever. Just tell me what the ravens were, what I unwittingly killed, and what you were doing there just *watching* the whole thing and letting me almost die." I realized I was being a tad dramatic, but even though he had removed my pain I was still feeling anxious about getting to the point where he would tell me what I was going to have to do.

"I like your enthusiasm, Danny." He rubbed the hair on top of my head and continued, "The only way souls escape my watchful eye is if they can get access to a liminal vestibule. Crows...cats...foxes... all are examples of liminal creatures. Their existence is tied to life and death. I try to keep them out for...obvious reasons, but the clever bastards make it in sometimes."

I let out a quick guffaw, "Seriously? You, the almighty Prince of Hell, have yet to master pest control?"

"Well, I am not Prince of Earth, Danny. There is only so much I can do about earth's creatures as they are outside of my jurisdiction."

“Ok... so...something I have been dying to ask is, am I in Hell? I have kinda been thinking I’m in Hell for awhile.”

“You are in an underground palace. *My* underground palace. You are still on Earth, if that’s what you’re wondering. And if your concept of Hell is that of a place beneath the human realm that is filled with Daemons and gated souls, then I don’t see why you can’t call it that. If your concept goes any further than that, you might be disappointed.”

“Gotcha. Ok, let’s see if I’m still following. Umm...We’re in a dugout palace, imperceptible to people, but animals still find it somehow, especially the ones with an affinity for death. But... how do the souls use the animals as... what did you call them? Vestibules? Are you telling me that Edgar Allen Poe was onto something with his supernatural animals?”

“Dugout isn’t the right word, not at all. But that’s neither here nor there. I assume you are referring to Poe’s lengthy discussions of black cats and ravens, but what you might find more interesting is the knowledge that Poe, like you, was a damphyr.”

“What? That’s amazing!” I didn’t think something like that would make me happy, but I felt this strange connection to one of my poetic heroes and was momentarily tempted to forget about the mission and ask Athan everything he knew about half vampires like me.

Before I got the chance, Dimitri lifted his head off my lap so fast he might have broken my nose if it weren’t lifted so high from looking up at Athan. “Poe was a miserable man who never understood what he was. He was nothing like Danica.”



Dimitri sat up as if he had been alert and present in the conversation the whole time rather than passed out on my lap recovering from the hallucinogenic trip Athan had made him take. He really looked wonderful all of the sudden, like that three-minute power nap had been all he needed to recover. His grey eyes were bright. His hair was a little ruffled and he had more stubble on his chin than usual, but that just made him look sexier. Or maybe I just loved him so much that seeing him in a recovered state was the most beautiful sight in the world. *No, he really is just that gorgeous all the time*, I thought.

## CHAPTER II VENGEFUL SPIRITS

*Perspective: Danica*

“And I am grateful every day that you are helping me handle being human and vampire at the same time, Dimitri.” I smiled at him and he grinned back. It was so nice to see him smile.

“Back to the matter at hand, Athan, Danica has asked you who attacked her, and I would especially like to know why.” Dimitri took the lead on the conversation, which was probably good because I was getting distracted.

Athan turned around and paced a couple of steps away from us. Turning back to face us he responded, “The who and the why amount to pretty much the same thing...depending on the who. The three missing souls were Edgar, Jonah, and Stacia. Do the names ring a bell?”

I felt my throat tighten before I could speak. “Stacia does. For me. I...”

“Killed her? Yes, I know. I collected her soul.” Athan stated quite matter-of-factly which made me angry, but in a terrible way because even I knew that it was indeed a matter of fact. One I was still trying to get a grip on.

“She defended herself. That’s all,” Dimitri added, putting an arm around my shoulder and pulling me in close to his chest. “What do Edgar and Jonah have to do with any of that?”

“Who are Edgar and Jonah?” I asked, directing my question toward either of the men who seemed to know something I didn’t.

“They’re Dimitri’s brothers. He hasn’t told you about them? That’s interesting...” Athan mused.

I shot Dimitri a quick *you better tell me now* look, but his response seemed more toward Athan than me, “They are not my brothers. It’s...more complicated than that.” Then, thankfully, he turned to address me, “Danny, my relation to Edgar and Jonah is the same as my relation to your mother.”

The explanation surprised me, but more because I felt like I should have known, or guessed, or asked him before. My mother knew Dimitri because they were sort of raised together as new vampires, kind of like a family or a clan. I was surprised that I had never asked him much about that time, unless I was asking about my mother. I guess I was more interested in his recent decades than his early ones. I met Dimitri’s eyes and tried to assure him that I was not going to let Athan turn us against each other for his amusement just because I didn’t know everything about his past, “Oh. Wow. I guess I never even thought about that. Of course, your maker made more than just the two of you. That’s not surprising. So, what did you do to them? Why would they attack me? Why would they be in league with Stacia?”

“Well...tell us Dimitri. I could tell her myself, but I’m sure you could *execute* it better.” Something about the word “execute” made Athan chuckle, which made my stomach churn in anticipation of where this was going. I had forgiven a lot of weird discoveries about Dimitri’s past, but I was afraid there was only so much I could take all at once.

“Bravo, Athan. Your puns still slay me,” Dimitri rolled his eyes. “I guess you’ll find out one way or another. The short explanation is...well... the relation you have to Stacia is much the same as my relation to Jonah and Edgar. Do you remember when you tried to reason with her? I will never forget it. It’s the moment I knew I had deep, unrelenting feelings for you. You practically begged her not to make you kill her. You offered her mercy and she refused. It reminded me of when my brothers refused to change.

“They refused to be anything like our maker taught us to be. They became heathen swine as soon as we left our maker’s home. Jonah was always vicious, so that was not terribly surprising, but Edgar had so much potential. Edgar could have been the most exquisite composer humankind had ever seen, but he was heartbroken over your mother and he followed Jonah into a path of blood and destruction. They were completely exposing themselves, exposing all vampires, by wreaking havoc with blood bath after blood bath in town after town. I begged them to stop, but in the end, I had to stop them with force,” He paused and hung his head. “It haunts me to this day.”

I wrapped my arms around him to let him know that I understood and that it didn’t scare me even though a part of me wondered why it didn’t. “But you make it sound like it happened so long ago. I mean you and my mom have been away from your maker for what...sixty...eighty years or something? Why would they just come after you now?”

“Maybe because I’m better at *pest control* than your girlfriend thinks.” Athan chimed in with a cocky smile.

I decided not to respond directly to his little jab. I figured I deserved it. After all, I had insulted the Prince's power. "Let me get this straight. The three souls that want to avenge their own deaths, which were either at the hand of me or Dimitri, found each other here and decided to break out together and peck us to death as ravens?"

"Something like that." Athan shrugged and then came to join us on the couch. At first he looked like he was going to force us apart and sit between us, but instead he just sat to my right, reclined toward the arm of the couch and perched his legs on my lap.

## CHAPTER III AN AUDITION

*Perspective: Danica*

“So, what would you have us do? Are we going to track down the other two crows and just kill them? Oh, and who are the remaining two? Which one did I kill? And...if it’s that easy, why didn’t you do it earlier?” My mind was spinning. It was starting to seem like an incredibly easy mission. After all, I had inadvertently completed one third of it already. Easy didn’t seem right though. In fact, it felt very, very wrong.

“I could have, but it was more fun watching you.” Athan gave me a wink as he shifted his weight on the couch, putting a slightly painful amount of weight on my lap where his legs remained. “Look, Danica. Like any good ruler, I’ve been able to delegate most of my work, but your gift of reading thoughts has finally made it possible for me to delegate the task of retrieving escaped souls. I’m asking you to do this mission in the hope that you will succeed and I can have you on call for the future. That desk downstairs...it could really be yours.”

I knew I was staring at him suspiciously, but I couldn’t help it. Athan Levi, Leviathan, prince of Hell, whatever he was, was offering me...or rather demanding that I take a job. It wasn’t exactly the career I’d dreamed of, nor had he offered any form of compensation...just a mahogany desk with my initial carved into it. I wondered what the D had actually stood for...

“For how long, Athan?” Dimitri demanded. “The rest of her life?”

“Perhaps. It’s certainly hard to say with Damphyr’s, as you know, Dimitri.”

I shuddered at Athan's comment. He obviously knew a lot more about half-human, half-vampires than I did. It didn't come as a surprise to me to hear about our tenuous life expectancy, but I never liked thinking about it. My concerns quickly became more about Dimitri than about my unusual mortality. I could tell Athan was making him angry, but that he was not sure where exactly to throw that anger. I had only known Athan briefly, but already I knew it was unwise to throw anger in his direction. Dimitri had known him much longer than I had, so I hoped he would tread even more carefully.

Still, I decided to interject, "Why is this my first mission, Athan? Why is this my big audition for you? Does it have something to do with the souls we're after and the fact we murdered them in life or is this all a big coincidence because of how you found me on the road being attacked by them?"

"That might be the smartest question you've asked since you arrived." Athan sat up a bit in order to accompany his condescending compliment with a pat on my thigh. I tried my best not to look amused, but there was something about his snarky attitude that I found oddly charming at times.

"Then get on with the answer, Athan," Dimitri pressed firmly.

"Some of this is coincidence, but my plans form pretty quickly as you might imagine. This mission is going to be perhaps the most challenging mission you will ever face, even if you do work for me the rest of your life," Athan made sure he was looking at Dimitri as he said it. It was perhaps the first thing I found truly despicable about Athan. He was taunting Dimitri with my life. I tried to listen as he continued, but I just

kept thinking about what it meant that I might have no choice but to work for Athan, whom it seemed likely I would come to despise, for the rest of my life and having had no choice in the matter whatsoever.

“Does that answer your question, Danica?” Athan smiled as if he knew what was happening in my thoughts, which he easily could. He was better at mind reading than I was. I’m sure he could multi-task.

“Maybe, but I wasn’t listening, sorry. I was trying to wrap my head around the whole working for you forever thing.” I blurted. Since he already knew what I was thinking, I didn’t want to let him catch me in a lie.

Athan nodded as if he appreciated either my honesty or my understanding that he would always be able to know my thoughts before I could even articulate them. Then he proceeded to answer my question, yet again I suppose. “You killed Edgar, to answer your question from earlier. Stacia and Jonah are still out there waiting for you. This will be a challenge because they will try to kill you. My guess, since Stacia was a werewolf, is that she’ll attack you as a wolf or a coyote...whatever’s available to her. She’ll try to remain near other vestibules at all times so she can flee if you get close to killing her. And I cannot even imagine the ways in which Jonah has thought about killing Dimitri. He has had so many years to mull it over. So if you two can pull this off, I’m sure you can carry on my missions of collecting strangers. Those souls won’t even see you coming.”

I stayed silent a moment and peered into Dimitri’s eyes. I wanted to peer into his thoughts, but something about his expression told me I wasn’t welcome. That hadn’t



always stopped me, but I was so happy he had found me in Hell that I didn't want to mess things up already.

"I'm sorry, Danny. This is my fault." Dimitri wouldn't meet my gaze. He wouldn't look at Athan either. Athan and I looked at each other for a moment, but Athan just shrugged as if to tell me this, like much of earth and humanity, was out of his jurisdiction.

"Yes, Dimitri. It's your fault I'm not dead at the hands of my mother who would have served me on a silver platter to some league that thinks I'm a monstrosity. What did you call them? Dominions? At least Athan makes it all sound like employment. That name makes it sound like...well, dominion." I kissed him on the cheek, aware my pun might not have been terribly helpful. He finally turned his head to look at me and when his eyes met mine, I noticed his grey eyes looked clouded behind what could at any moment become tears, bloody vampire tears.

I took his chin in my hands and pressed my lips against his. It was all I could think of to do to stop the tears from falling. His arm, which had been limply wrapped around me tightened, and after a blissful moment, Athan cleared his throat to remind us he was in the room.

"All right, Athan," I snapped, annoyed at his impatience, and experiencing my own, "We get it. You're sending us after souls trying to kill us. Honestly, it sounds like they were already trying, so I guess thanks for the heads up and the explanation because I was completely baffled by those crows attacking me earlier. Is there anything else we should know, or can we get to it?"

“By all means.” Athan lifted his legs from my lap, sat up, and gestured toward the door. “Dimitri must know how to get back the way you came from, since he found his way here.”

That made me smile, because I was so impressed and grateful he came after me. “Well then, we’ll be on our way,” I said as I stood and offered Dimitri my hand.

Dimitri grabbed my hand, but instead of using it to pull himself up, he used it to pull me back down to the couch with him and immediately wrapped both hands around my waist. “In a minute. Let’s make Athan uncomfortable just a little longer,” he whispered, pulling me in for a kiss as fiery as the flames surrounding us.

## CHAPTER IV HERE, KITTY, KITTY

*Perspective: Danica*

“So, how exactly did you figure out where I was or...that I needed you to come after me?” I asked Dimitri as we hiked through desert similar to that around Dimitri’s mansion in Nevada, but prettier somehow. I couldn’t tell if it was the majesty of Utah or the fact that I had prepared myself to be underground much longer than I was...like perhaps forever.

Dimitri shrugged. “Your captor left me a note.”

“Really? With detailed directions and everything?” I found that surprising, but not shocking since Athan seemed to want him there. I guessed getting both of us there had been the plan the whole time and it was easier to have Dimitri come after me than expect the two of us to accept an invitation.

“No. The note is how I knew you needed me to come after you. I followed your Mini Cooper’s tracks until I got close enough to suspect where you were and who you were with,” he added plainly. That was less surprising. Of course they would have made it challenging for Dimitri or he would have suspected Athan was luring him there. I wasn’t so sure that would have stopped him from coming, though. I guess Athan just wanted a head start to frighten me.

“It must be boring to be a prince of Hell for eons,” I thought out loud.

“I suppose so. Why do you mention it?” Dimitri gave me an endearing smile, kindly overlooking how blatantly out of context my comment was.

“Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking that of course Athan wouldn’t have made it too easy for you to find me even though he obviously wanted you there.” I linked arms with him and put my head on his shoulder. It slowed us down a little, but I didn’t care.

Dimitri laughed and his luminous smile shone brightly, even beside the glowing desert sunrise. “What’s so funny?” I asked him, nudging his side gently with my elbow.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that I was thinking the same thing.” He released his arm from mine and then wrapped it around my shoulder, giving me a tight squeeze. I responded by wrapping my arms around his waist, suddenly remembering how much taller he was than me. He had seemed smaller passed out on the couch.

“Do you know where my Mini Cooper is?” I asked with more desperation than I had wanted to express.

Dimitri hesitated and quickened his walking pace before finally responding, “I do, and I could take you to it, but it would not be wise.”

“Why not?” The question slipped out before I could actually think much about it. He started to answer, but I interrupted him, putting it together for myself. “Because our assailants will be looking for me in that Mini.” Dimitri remained silent but I added something, officially having more of a conversation with myself more than with him. “But couldn’t that make it easier? I mean, then we wouldn’t even have to track them. We could just start driving back toward where I met them last and let them come to us. It was really a pathetic attempt they made before, and now that you’re with me, we really have nothing to worry about.”

“Danny, they underestimated you once. I doubt they’ll do it again, especially now that you’re not alone. Besides, it is always better to catch your attacker off guard. Acting as bait should always be a last resort.” Dimitri spoke quietly and firmly, almost in a whisper.

“Right,” I whispered back, not sure exactly why we were suddenly being so quiet.

“Do you hear anything?”

I hadn’t heard anything, but I also hadn’t been listening. Dimitri’s tone was so urgent I figured I better start, so I closed my eyes and let him lead me since my arms were still around his waist and his arm was still gripping my left shoulder. With my eyes closed I could concentrate better on the thoughts around me. At first I heard Dimitri’s, but I tried to tune them out. He was thinking about how something felt wrong. I wanted to learn more about his thoughts, but I knew I needed to open my mind to receive any other thoughts in the vicinity. After a few moments of silence I was about to give up and answer “no” to Dimitri’s question, but then I heard it. There were no words, just a repetitive sound or slur. *Teh Teh Teh. Sssssssss. Teh Teh Teh. Sssssssss.*

“I hear hissing and ‘T’ sounds.” As I said it, we both released each other from our embrace and readied our hands to grip our knives if necessary. I tried to meet his eyes, but couldn’t because they were so busy scanning the nearby bushes.

“Keep walking, but also keep listening. And stay a safe distance from the bushes,” Dimitri instructed, taking the first stride after our brief intermission. I nodded and followed a few paces behind him.

We walked in silence until I could see Dimitri's burnt orange Spyder Eclipse in the distance. As we continued moving toward the vehicle, the thoughts became intrusive. I didn't even have to concentrate to hear them. Still, I couldn't make out an actual word. The sounds just became bolder inside my head. *TEH TEH TEH. SSSSSSSSSS. TEH TEH TEH. SSSSSSSSSS.*

"Dimitri. I think whatever it is, is waiting for us at your car." I had quickened my pace to catch up to him, but it was unnecessary because he came to a complete stop as I spoke.

I looked up at him, about to ask why he'd stopped when he called out, "Here, Kitty, Kitty."

About twenty yards ahead of us, creeping out from behind the Eclipse, was a bobcat that looked more than willing to respond to Dimitri's call. As it began to run, Dimitri and I instantly began hurling knives at it. My first knife missed, but my second landed in its chest. Dimitri nailed both of his shots, putting a knife in each of its eyes. Without thinking, I ran toward the corpse and the car to retrieve my knives, get in, and go anywhere else. Before I could reach either, the bobcat body dissipated.

The shock of it slowed me down for a moment, but I still wanted to see what happened to my knives, so I kept moving toward the empty space where the bobcat had been. As I approached it, I noticed that Dimitri, with his undetectable vampire speed, had beaten me there. "Well, that was interesting," he observed.

## CHAPTER V COUNTING

*Perspective: Danica*

“Why are our daggers clean?” I asked as we entered the car, not really expecting Dimitri to know any more than I did, considering the surprised look on his face.

“I’m not sure. Is that what happened when you killed the crow?”

I took a deep breath while I tried to remember. “I don’t think so, but I pulled the knife from it and flung it away from my sight really fast.”

“Well, that thing disappeared really fast, so how fast are we talking?” His voice wasn’t accusatory, but I felt guilty anyway.

“I don’t really know...I had kind of...had a tiny...very tiny...taste of my blood that was just tantalizingly dripping from my arm because of the attack.” I confessed.

“Danny, you know how dangerous it is for you to feed alone,” he said calmly, but firmly.

I nodded. I did know and I did not need to be reminded, but that didn’t change the fact that I had succumbed to temptation in the middle of nowhere while I was completely alone. *Well, almost.* I thought. *I suppose Athan was around.* I still wondered how long it would be until I could safely feed from my human blood without needing Dimitri to monitor my human vitals so I didn’t drain myself, but it didn’t feel like the right time to press Dimitri about it.

“So it’s possible the raven magically evaporated after I did that.” I shrugged, fleeing from the subject of my feeding by getting back to the original question.

“Good enough for me. I wish we knew who it was, but either way Athan will be pleased.” Dimitri moved quickly to the car and unlocked my door well before I was next to it.

*Athan will be pleased.* I repeated in my thoughts a few times, remembering the knife coming out of his body clean...cleaner than the knife I pulled from the raven.

“So, the plan is to head back to where your car spun out?” Dimitri interrupted my thoughts.

I ignored the question and began saying the sounds that came from the bobcat’s mind out loud. “Teh Teh Teeehhh Sssssss TeehssssTeh...Test! Test! It was a test! I swear if he weren’t immortal I’d kill him.”

“Slow down, Danny. You’re the mind reader, not me.”

“It was a flipping test, Dimitri. Athan is sending us out on an obstacle course. I bet he will keep doing it. He tested me before you got there and he made me think that if I didn’t pass, he’d get rid of me in some horrible way.” The anger toward Athan that I’d attempted to suppress as much as possible in his presence began to surface.

Dimitri laughed and even though I normally loved his laugh, it made me want to throw all of my anger at him. “You think it’s funny that you might not have had anything left of me to find by the time you got there?” I yelled at the dashboard, too angry to move my head in his direction.

“No, Danny.” His laughter ceased immediately. “It’s just that...*that* is the Athan I know. He loves games and he loves tests. I laughed because it reminded me of what



you said earlier about him being bored. I think you might be right. Also, you're cute when you're angry."

"Famous last words," I uttered bitterly, trying not smile.

"Danny, get to the back seat, fold the seatbacks to allow access to the trunk, and grab the tranquilizer gun."

I couldn't see any reason to do so from where I was sitting, but I knew better than to question Dimitri's superior senses. Wishing I had a little blood to cue my own enhanced vampire senses, I moved as quickly as my human form would allow to the back seat so that I could do as he instructed. Just before I reached for the tranquilizer gun, I caught a glimpse of what would soon be my target. About fifty yards behind us, barreling between our tire tracks, was a sandy blond grizzly bear.

"I've got it!" I yelled. "Loose the convertible top!"

"No! Get back in the front seat, now! The window is down. Shoot from there. Buckle up if you can." He called back.

I was puzzled, but I trusted him. I hopped clumsily, but quickly to the front and stuck my head and tranquilizer gun out of the passenger window. I took aim and fired three off right away before asking, "How many do you think it will take?"

"Just keep shooting until it goes down or something else shows up."

My muscles tightened at the thought that Athan might have more tests on the way, but I forced myself to take a deep breath and shoot straight. After six more darts, the bear went down. "It's down. Is there anything else?" I asked, a little short of breath.

“As far as I can tell, no.” He slowed down the car and began turning around. It took no time at all to drive up to the bear, making me finally realize just how close it had come to us before I finally shot it down.

“Do we have to kill it?” I asked as we stepped out of the car. “Is that part of the test?” I hadn’t read its thoughts so I had no idea if it was a real bear, a test bear, or a supernatural that Dimitri or I killed seeking vengeance.

“That would be the safest thing to do.” Dimitri smiled at me as if he knew that wasn’t the answer I was looking for.

“What’s the reckless thing to do?” I smiled back.

“Let’s see...you landed seven darts in him. How many did you shoot?”

“Nine.”

“Not bad, Danny. Well, it will be waking up in about five minutes so we need to make a quick decision. We could kill it now and risk nothing, or we could wait until it begins waking up so you can listen for its thoughts and risk having to deal with it then.”

I looked down for a second at the tranquilizer gun that was still in my hands. “If I shoot him with this thing more than five times, kill him as soon as you get the chance. If I shoot him with five or less, just get in the car and drive fast.”

Dimitri nodded without any request for further explanation or convincing. We both knew there wouldn’t be time for talking. I didn’t want to have to explain the sounds or thoughts I was hearing. I was going to have to make a quick judgment call and he was going to have to trust me. That was fine. Trusting each other was something we had gotten pretty good at over the summer.

We stood in silence a few feet from the bear's belly. I tried my best to make my mind as dull as the scene of our patiently waiting for the thing to stir. From deep within the silence came the shyest whisper of thought. *One...Two...Three...*

It didn't particularly resemble Dimitri's thoughts, but I had to ask him, "Are you counting in your head?"

"No."

*One...Two...Three...*

*One, Two, Three, what?!?* My panicked thoughts began to sound over the soft thought of the other. *Why is it counting? Is it Stacia counting the moments before she was strong enough to kill me? Is it some other animal hidden somewhere and counting up to the moment it will strike while we are off guard, concerning ourselves with the bear?*

The bear began to move and I knew that I needed to decide. I was pretty sure that since nothing else was attacking us yet, the thoughts were coming from the bear, meaning it wasn't just an ordinary bear. I just wasn't sure if it was a test, Stacia, or Jonah. I didn't need to be sure of that. I knew we had to kill the bear whether it would disappear into thin air or simply become impossible for the soul to use as its vestibule and force it to return to Athan's palace. Accepting that I would find out if it was a test or not after Dimitri killed it, I finally let six shots fly.

In the brief moment between my last shot and Dimitri breaking the bear's neck so fast I couldn't really see how he managed it, the bear's full thought finally came through to me clearly. *Testing. One, Two, Three. Testing. One, Two, Three.*

## CHAPTER VI BLOOD AND VENOM

*Perspective: Danica*

The bear, or whatever it was, disintegrated even while Dimitri's hands were locked around its neck. My rage was softened by his sweet look of surprise and wonder. Dimitri had lived so long that he was not often struck by novelty. I assumed that was why I interested him so much. I possessed a gift he'd never seen and was somewhat of a genetic anomaly, so I offered him something new. I loved that about him. He had more money, more knowledge, and more strength and ability than a human could ever possess in a lifetime, but he was still as curious as a child—always seeking new knowledge and new experiences. “What did it feel like when it disappeared? Anything?” I asked him.

“It felt...hot.” He turned his gaze toward me and extended his palms outward so that I could see they had been badly burned.

I ran toward him to get a closer look at his wounds but as soon as I was next to him his palms began to heal. *Oh, the perks of being a vampire...*

“We should get back in the car, but reload that tranquilizer gun and keep it with you at all times from now on.” All of his wonder from our new tests, apparently forged in flames, had left his voice. He was back in mission mode.

“No problem. I think I was born to ride shotgun.” Seeing his hands were completely healed, I gave one of them a tight squeeze and began making my way to the car.

“You were born for a lot of things, Danny, but for our current predicament the most important thing is for you to always be listening for thoughts. I know it will be exhausting for you, but...”

I think he continued talking, but a quick snapping sound and the sharp pain of punctured skin kept me from hearing it. I let out an embarrassingly high pitched yelp and shuffled back to see a snake slithering out from behind the front tire and making its way toward me for a second bite. I barely got my dagger out in time to send it down the snake’s throat through its widely opened jaw. Dimitri responded to my yelp with impeccable speed and managed to get his arms around my shoulders just in time to keep me from falling to the ground.

“Dimitri...can you do something about this while I pass out?” I asked, feeling extremely light-headed and queasy.

“No, Danny. There is nothing I can do. You have to stay with me and drink from your bicep right now!”

“Noooo...I’m not hungggrry. Suck out the venom or sssomething.” The pain and light-headedness made words harder to get out.

“Danny! I CANNOT do that! Drink from your bicep this instant before the venom spreads to that area.” He took one of my daggers from its carrier on my waist and made a quick cut, unleashing the aroma of my blood.

I hated when Dimitri yelled at me, but he always had a good reason for it. I strained my neck to get my lips to the blood dripping from the cut on my left bicep. The first bit of it made me feel better, but as I continued, the pain around the wounded area

became more intense. Dimitri had picked me up completely and carried me into the back of his car, where he encouraged me to keep drinking despite my whimpers of protestation.

“You have to keep going, Danny. You have to change into a vampire so that your body will heal itself. It is working. I promise. As your vampire blood cells are being revived by your human blood cells, they are pumping the venom out of your system. It’s actually quite amazing.”

*But why is it taking so long? The vampire part of me is supposed to be fast,* I thought as I continued to drink in complete agony.

“Just a bit more, Danny. You’re almost done.” Dimitri said as if he were the mind reader in the relationship.

I tried to imagine that the pain was relief and with every sip of blood, I felt the pressure of the venom being removed. It didn’t work. Every sip felt more like someone was making a deeper cut into the area and ripping something out of me.

“I think that was it, Danny. Take two more sips to be safe.”

I wanted to stop what I was doing and snap at him for not realizing just what he was asking, but I knew it was better to be safe and that I needed to prove my strength at that moment and for the rest of the time Athan was testing me. To my surprise, those last two sips for safety were not excruciating. In fact, they were as delicious and relieving as I had tried to imagine them being.

“Dimitri...” I stopped to lick the remaining blood off my lips and put pressure on the cut on my arm.

“Yes, Danny? How do you feel?” he asked as he ripped off a piece of his shirt.

“Good. But that really sucked.”

Dimitri smiled as he tied the piece of what was probably an expensive shirt, because it felt better than the type of cotton I was used to, around my open wound. “I bet it did, but I knew you would get through it.”

His comment triggered some lingering animosity toward him and Athan. “Why didn’t you help me? Did you think I needed MORE testing?”

“No, Danny, of course not. I helped you in every way I could.”

That calmed me down a bit. It was true that I shouldn’t have accused him of not helping me at all. He had held me and made the cut for me and told me what to do. He had monitored the wound to make sure it was working. He was even encouraging and comforting. So the real question I decided to ask was, “I have been under the impression you have no interest in drinking my blood because...well, because I need it, since it is all I drink, for one thing. And also because you prefer full human blood. In other words, I thought you chose not to drink my blood, not that were unable. Are you...unable to drink my blood for some reason?”

Dimitri sighed and put one foot outside of the car door. “Let’s have this talk while we drive.”

“Fine,” I agreed, but I had no desire to step back outside of the car and find another snake waiting for me. Instead, I hopped through the middle of the front seats and landed in the driver’s seat, enjoying the ease and speed with which I was able to do it as a vampire.

## CHAPTER VII TAKING THE WHEEL

*Perspective: Danica*

“What happened to you being born to ride shotgun?” Dimitri asked when he realized I had beaten him to the driver’s seat. It was nice to be within his level of speed again. Being human with him made me feel like a sloth.

“That seemed fine to me as a human, but my vampire senses are telling me that I should take the next shift driving. We do potentially have a long way to go.” It was an honest, though simple, way of expressing how I felt. Being a vampire made me feel different about things sometimes. I felt more powerful so I made bolder decisions and followed my instincts more. Whatever chemistry took place in my body when I changed seemed to give me new ideas and impulses. I gave in to them because those impulses made fewer mistakes than my human ones did. When I tried to think about what my body was doing or isolate my actions, everything felt off, but when I listened to my body and let it move, the way it wanted to move everything went right. So, I wasn’t lying to Dimitri when I said my vampire senses wanted me to drive. They did. It wasn’t because we had a long way to go, though. I suddenly resented Dimitri for doing away with my suggestion to go ahead and take my Mini Cooper since that is what Stacia and Jonah would be looking for. Something was telling me to drive. They would be looking. I would be listening. I knew the four of us would meet soon if I drove, and having made a hearty meal of my blood, I felt ready for it.



Dimitri grabbed the tranquilizer gun I'd dropped while he carried me to the car and brought it to the car with him to assume his new position of riding shotgun. "Are you sure you are all right? You've got a wild look in your eyes."

I leaned to the right and lifted my chest to see my eyes in the rear view mirror and almost swerved off the road because I looked too long. They did look different. They looked...dangerous.

"Whoa, Danny. You are not making your case to be the driver look like a good one right now." Dimitri put his hand on my shoulder and I shifted under its weight uncomfortably.

"Then stop distracting me with your stupid comments about my eyes," I returned coldly. I felt in control of the wheel, but the car did seem to be swerving a bit too much still.

"Danny, calm down. It was not my intention to upset you. I'm just concerned."

I tried to calm down, but something was keeping me worked up. I tried to think about what it might be that had me so on edge. Then I remembered the conversation we were supposed to be having. "I'm concerned too. I am concerned about you not being able to drink my blood for some reason. What is the reason?"

"I am able to drink your blood, but I might be unable to stop. So, you were right before. I choose not to because I choose not to risk killing you."

"Well, you'd only kill the human part of me. Right?"

Dimitri took his hand off my shoulder. "Sure, but it is still a risk I am unwilling to take. You really don't sound like yourself, Danica."

I wondered why I had said that instead of asking more questions or showing more concern for my safety. I gave him the best answer I could think of. “I just feel so powerful right now, Dimitri. I might have drunk more blood than ever before and it feels...good. Really, really good. It makes me care less about the human part. This is just so much better.” The words sounded strange coming out of my mouth, but I meant every one. I felt ready, and excited to take Stacia down a second time—a feeling I’d never really had as a human. I felt incendiary.

“Are you even wondering why I cannot trust myself to stop, or are you too busy relishing the ecstasy of your new strength?”

“Huh?” I barely remembered what he couldn’t trust himself to stop. When I did remember, I understood why he was surprised I hadn’t asked about it. “Yes. I am wondering. Tell me.”

“About a decade ago, I began to feel out of control when I was drinking blood. See, in my early years your mother, Edgar, Jonah, and our master could all share one person. Our master would always stop us and take the final pulse, the actual kill, for himself. I always thought it was part of his ritual. He made taking lives as acts of mercy a religious experience for himself. Or so I thought. I’ve since realized that when vampires reach a certain age, taking the final pulse becomes essential to the feeding process. It has recently become so for me. I thought about starving myself for a long time. Finally I decided to follow in my master’s footsteps more or less and instead I choose whom I kill carefully. I stalk the crowds on the Las Vegas strip until I find someone I deem to be more hazardous to the human race than I am.”

Dimitri continued to say something about how he had wanted to tell me about what he did in Vegas for weeks, but he didn't know how and blah, blah, blah. I was more interested in what my next move should be. As we started to get into some wickedly curvy mountain passes around Zion Canyon, I felt the woods calling me. The trees were beautiful and everything around them was lush. I began looking for a shoulder off the road large enough to park the car on so we could get out and start moving toward our targets. As I continued to scan the side of the road, I precariously swerved close to the edge of the cliff.

“Danica! Watch it! Slow down and pull over up ahead.”

His eyes must have been just slightly better than mine. He had seen a point to pull over just moments before I had. “All right,” I told him without argument, which was easy enough to do since pulling over had been my plan all along.

## CHAPTER VIII PULLING OVER

*Perspective: Dimitri*

As Danica slowed the car and began to pull over, Dimitri assessed their situation. He had been suspicious, but now was certain that something was in the car with them, something carrying the last soul they needed to send back to Athan since Danica had just killed a rattlesnake that did not disappear like the tests had. It was either an actual desert snake, or Stacia or Jonah. Dimitri was confident it was Stacia or Jonah since he had dealt with plenty of rattlesnakes and never come across one hiding behind a tire just to strike an ankle when the time was right, especially one that didn't announce itself with its rattle.

Whichever and whatever it was, it was close enough to be manipulating Danica's thoughts and actions and giving her a crazed look. Dimitri had witnessed the same look on her face once before. It was in the mountains near his house while they were training. She looked like she might jump off the ledge. It hadn't been just the look that had alarmed him. It was a feeling too. The longer he worked with Danica on her gift and the more their minds melded together as she practiced searching for memories and isolating thoughts, the more he began to pick up on her feelings and thoughts. It wasn't as though he could fully read her thoughts, but he could sense them better than before. It was as if he had been tuned into the energy produced by her thoughts.

There had been moments when he had felt her terror and anxiety as she slept. It always made him nervous, but he was hopeful that the connection they'd forged would

help him keep her safe. That hope was gone. She had been kidnapped and forced into a perilous job trial because of a debt to Athan that he had taken on without her consent. He hadn't known what to do in that moment at the top of the mountain when he had felt around him a far more sinister energy than Danica had ever produced. He hadn't worried about it much until he could not find her, and instead found a note letting him know she'd been taken from him.

Now that she had the same look he had seen and produced the same menacing energy as she had hours before she was attacked and then kidnapped, he knew something was terribly wrong. It had to have been the same crows that attacked her in her Mini Cooper that had been surrounding and manipulating her that morning on the mountain. Their assailants were back in some other form to get Danica to drive off the road. It wouldn't kill them, especially with Danica having drunk her human blood and changed into a vampire, but it would surely weaken them and make them easier targets for Stacia or Jonah in whatever form they had taken.

As the car slowed, almost to a complete stop he heard what he had been listening for. There was a snake underneath his seat. Without the noise of the car, the sound of its slithering became perfectly audible with his highly receptive hearing. Dimitri readied himself for the snake to strike the moment the car stopped, but it didn't. *Why?* He wondered. Then as Danica began to open the door, it occurred to him. Stacia or Jonah would want to attack where there were other vestibules nearby so they could have a chance of re-entering something if their original vestibule was killed.

"Do not open that door, Danny," Dimitri commanded.

“But I feel like I should,” she said plainly. “I feel like they’re out there.”

“No, Danny. It’s in here.” Dimitri looked down at his seat, hands ready for something to strike.

“Then you stay here. I’m going.”

As soon as she opened the door the snake emerged, moving more toward the outside than toward Dimitri. It seemed more focused on making it outside of the car than attacking Dimitri, giving Dimitri the time to catch it in his hands and squeeze it. The snake slithered with all its might, but Dimitri was able to stretch his left arm out far enough to slide his grip up under its jaw so it was utterly defenseless despite its struggle.

“Close the door!” Dimitri called out to Danica, but she didn’t respond. Instead she ran across the road just fast enough to avoid a run in with the SUV that took out the open door of the car.

He picked up his left leg and quickly swung it over the center console to push the trunk release as he made his way out of the vehicle and around to the trunk. He released his grip below the snake’s jaw and swung its head to hit the ground. As he brought it back up, he threw it in the trunk with his left hand, and tossed a dagger into its head with his right. Immediately he closed the trunk, hoping that would keep it closed off from seeking other vestibules long enough for Stacia’s or Jonah’s soul to be sent back behind Athan’s gates.

“Danica!” he called as he ran after her into the woods.

“Dimitri!” she called back. “It’s KILLING me.”

## CHAPTER IX TRACKING

*Perspective: Dimitri*

Dimitri tracked Danica's sounds as well as her scent. He detected no scent of her blood, but he did not let that give him any sort of hope. The ground was soft as if it had rained within the last four days. He glided through it making the slightest of sounds, avoiding brush and branches with his dexterous strides. He quickened his pace with every cry of agony that escaped Danica's lips. Trying to keep aware of his surroundings, he took an inventory of the wildlife around them. It was easy because he could detect their living pulses, as all vampires could sense a beating heart from a distance. He sensed nothing large or ferocious, not that he feared large and ferocious, but he was hoping for fewer distractions since he wished to give Danica his full attention.

Her scent became strong enough that he knew she was just within his reach when he heard her say, "Dimitri. I'm here. I'm fine," though she still sounded a little panicked and in pain.

"Danica, you neither sound nor look fine to me," Dimitri observed. She looked pale and her body was shaking almost convulsively.

"I'm NOT," she struggled to say, finishing her statement with a convulsive twitch and a cry of pain. "No, I am. It's nothing, Dimitri."

"Tell me what's going on, Danny." Dimitri scanned her body, beginning to wonder whether there was some small liminal being such as a leech or a tick that could

be clinging to her. All he saw was her convulsing abdomen, lifeless limbs, and bloodshot eyes.

“Stah...Stah...Stahsssss...AHHHHHH!” She screamed and her convulsions became violent, as if she were being punished for what she was trying to say.

Dimitri did not need to hear any more. “All right, Danny. I understand. Let’s go.” Dimitri scooped her up in his arms and scrambled through the forest with much less grace than before. She was not usually difficult for him to carry, but her convulsions and her vampire strength made her challenging to hold onto.

Loudly and clumsily, he made it back to the car without dropping her, though he was sure he was going to a couple of times. He forced her into the front seat, reclined the seat as far back as it would go, clasped the seatbelt around her waist and wrapped the shoulder strap around her shoulders and the back of the seat as many times as he could until she looked as if she was strapped to a medical backboard. She struggled and gave him a few tough punches in his ribs in the process, but he was able to do it quickly and without great difficulty.

Without hesitation, Dimitri made his way back into the driver’s seat, only to discover that he did not have the keys. He looked over at Danica and realized she had taken them when she had first left the car. He wanted to ask her where they were. Perhaps she still had them. Perhaps Stacia had forced her to throw them deep into the woods. *Stacia, he thought. Stacia is doing this to her. She is controlling her and killing her at the same time. But how?*



Dimitri did not bother to ask Danica about them. He did not want to ask her anything that would prompt Stacia to cause her more pain if she answered. He just stretched his arm out and felt around for the hide-a-key behind the left front wheel. Obtaining it, he quickly engaged the ignition, and turned his car around to head back to where they came from.

He was no longer worried about Athan's test. He knew that whatever form Stacia had taken to control Danica like that, Athan would be able to take care of it. Regardless of the how, Athan could not say they failed because they were bringing the last escaped soul directly to him. All Athan needed to do was figure out where it was hiding and save Danica's life from it. Dimitri hated that he did not know if he could possibly save her himself, but he did not want his pride in the way of her being saved one way or another.

He tried not to listen to Danica's struggles, tried not to hear her pain, but he could not ignore it. Even if he could stop his hearing and focus only on the road ahead of him, he could feel her pain. He could sense her terror. It was as if it were his own terror and pain. And then suddenly he realized he did feel a sense of terror coming purely from himself and not from his connection with Danica. He was terrified not just of losing her, but more specifically, of losing her human self.

He believed he had found her in time and that they were not so far from Athan's that she wouldn't survive somehow. The manner of her survival gave him more uncertainty. He was confident that her vampire blood was thick enough to bring her through this, but he was genuinely worried about her human blood. He could not deny

that, like Delia, he had a lasting affection for humanity and a longing to feel its excitement and its woes in a way he no longer could. With Danica, he began to feel human again. The connections he had made with her emotions and her energy as they worked on her gift of mind reading together had resuscitated the human emotions and energies he thought had been completely lost to him for over a century. He did not want to lose her, any part of her. He had known that because he knew he loved her. The new realization was that he did not want to lose her because if he did, he would be losing the new part of himself that reflected genuine humanity.

## CHAPTER X STRAPPED IN

*Perspective: Danica*

There were moments when I felt that I was watching myself from the back seat of the car as someone else possessed my body, tossing it about beneath the straitjacket Dimitri had made out of a seatbelt. I thought about how we might joke about it if we could get Stacia out of me before she did too much damage. “Remember that time you had to tie me to the front seat with a seatbelt?” I would ask him and we could laugh. I hoped I would hear him laugh again. Any glimpse I could catch of him from my seat showed only the image of his stone cold expression. It was the one he’d worn so often when we had first met. It was frightening and sinister.

When I did feel like I was in my own body, it hurt all over. My feet and hands tingled like they had all fallen asleep at the same time and my abdomen ached from convulsing. My shoulders felt bruised from their relentless struggle beneath the seatbelt. Sometimes I thought that if I stopped fighting her and just let her control me completely like she had at first when she’d caught me by surprise, I would stop hurting so much.

I tried not to give into that thought because I wasn’t sure if it was hers or mine. Besides, I knew what she wanted to do with my body, and it wasn’t good. So I kept fighting. I kept trying to think my own thoughts and feel my body. If I felt as if I had been kicked out to the back seat, I concentrated on getting back in. I wanted badly to speak to Dimitri. I wanted to tell him what was happening, but it seemed like he knew somehow. He even seemed to know where he was going and what to do about it.

I was glad he had a plan because I couldn't think about anything else except staying in my body and dealing with my pain. Somehow, thinking about my pain seemed to help, maybe because as long as it was my pain it was my body. Stacia seemed more interested in causing pain than feeling it, so perhaps I had the advantage over her there. Still, I needed to avoid thinking about strategy because it seemed as if our thoughts were somewhat shared. I occasionally got flashes of her with her former werewolf lovers. I assume she was thinking about everything I had taken from her when I had taken her life. She was a she-wolf, the leader of her pack. I had taken her pack away from her when I had saved them from her and her jealous lover, Brandon. Thoughts flashed of our big fight and my stabbing her with a knife dipped in the chemical formula my dad had secretly created in his lab to break up and destroy the supernatural gene. It was his longstanding project for my mother who hated all vampires including herself and quite possibly me, though she pretended to want a relationship with me after showing up out of nowhere after nearly twenty years.

I battled Stacia's every tormenting accusation of my guilt that she circulated throughout my physical being. I battled them by thinking of why I had to do what I did. I thought of Brandon torturing my friends and Stacia doing nothing about it even though she totally had the power to do something. I thought about how I tried to make a truce with her and she refused. To refute me she kept forcing me to watch myself stabbing her on repeat, as if that's how she had played and re-played the entire scenario out of context since it had happened. I knew I couldn't fight her on that one action. I hated seeing myself do it. I hated knowing that I'd done it. I realized that despite every reason I had

for doing it, nothing erased the fact that I did it. Nothing made it OK. *I'm sorry, I thought. I'm so so sorry. I can't undo it. I don't know if I would undo it if I could, but I'm sorry it happened. I'm just...so...sorry.*

At my admission, she seemed to calm down. It still felt as if she were kicking me and my limbs still tingled, but breathing felt easier and the convulsions turned into minor shaking. It happened just in time because Dimitri stopped the car and came around to untie me. I was glad to be calmer because it frustrated me to know I was giving him hell back in the woods when he was of course just trying to help me. He must have felt like he was stealing away with a wild baboon, trying to get me to his car.

The look on his face did not show any sign of relief at my quieted struggle. I was afraid he might think it meant I was dying, or that I had given into her. I wanted to read his thoughts, but I didn't dare let Stacia get near them. She might have calmed to reflect or something, but I was not convinced her thirst for revenge had been quenched. I tried to look where Dimitri was taking me. I hadn't noticed from the car, but now that we had stopped I recognized the tree the bobcat had emerged from and I knew he was taking me to Athan. Knowing where we were only made me more interested in finding out how we were getting there. I had been knocked out completely when Athan had taken me to the palace, so it was my first chance to see how one got there from Nowhere, Utah. Leaving the palace had been simple enough. We had taken an elevator and once we had arrived at the top, the roof of the elevator simply slid off to the right so we could climb out on the surface. I had thought it must be harder to get in than out.

It looked like we were headed to a small, rustic shack. I wondered if there would be some sort of invisible elevator awaiting us there. Instead, it was just a manhole with interesting engraving.

“Recludere,” Dimitri whispered to it.

It disappeared. It completely disappeared.

Without a warning, Dimitri jumped. All of my pain was replaced by the sensation of falling until I felt a jarring pain in my neck as we landed and it whiplashed forward.

Dimitri must have noticed, because he cradled my neck immediately. Our entrance seemed to sound a deep note from an organ. It was literally just one note, but it boomed loudly and reminded me of all the pipes I had seen lining the walls when I had been in Athan’s palace before.

I guessed it was a signal for Athan, so that he would know he had visitors, because he appeared out of thin air immediately. Stacia began fighting me once more, but her thoughts told me it was no longer me who had her attention. *No. No. Not him. Not him*, she thought. *Yes. Yes. He will fix this. Thank you, Dimitri*, I thought back.

## CHAPTER XI DETERMINED INDETERMINABLE

*Perspective: Danica*

“Athan...” Dimitri started, but Athan interrupted with a cheerful “Of course! That is...fascinating, though not surprising. I’ll be right back.”

Athan disappeared very briefly and reappeared like an apparition. His reappearance came with a glass box in the palm of his left hand. His right hand, he placed on my stomach. “Stacia, dear, you’ve had your fun. Now it’s time to come home.”

I felt a sharp pain in my gut and convulsed one last time at his touch, but immediately felt a symphony of relief throughout my body. My eyes no longer felt strained. My hands and feet no longer tingled. My shoulders still ached slightly, but I was not shaking and I felt as if I had completely regained control of my body. Stacia was gone. I was finally rid of her.

I had been so consumed by my feeling of relief that I had almost completely missed the sight of her soul filling the glass block like smoke or dry ice. It was kind of...beautiful. Dimitri lifted me slightly to kiss the top of my forehead but made no further move to release me from his cradling hold. I didn’t mind. I still felt a little weak, so it was nice to be held.

“Follow me.” Athan beckoned as he turned his back on us and marched down the grand hall of the palace. The fire stoves along the walls roared as we walked past them. I looked at the pipes that lined the walls above the stoves and wondered where the organ

they belonged to was. I couldn't spot it. I started to think perhaps it was underneath where we had landed, attached to the floor from below somehow.

Athan made a turn into what appeared to be a blank spot between two of the fire stoves, but with the touch of his hand the wall parted and left us a narrow opening, through which he entered.

"Do you think you can walk?" Dimitri asked me sweetly. There was no way he could squeeze us through that door carrying me.

"Yes, but I'm going to hold onto you from behind. These hallways of his creep me out," I admitted and he smiled. It was such a relief to see him smile again. He let me down slowly and I crept behind him and gripped his ripped shirt.

Dimitri followed Athan and I followed Dimitri through a dark maze of a hallway. It was pitch black for many steps, but then I started to see a glow around Dimitri's silhouette. I peeked around him and the glow was almost overwhelming to look at directly, but I could not look away. It was mesmerizing.

As we got closer, I recognized that the glow was coming from several thousand glass boxes that looked just like the one Athan had trapped Stacia in.

"So this is where you keep them? It's like a warehouse for souls?" I blurted.

"It's more than a warehouse," he said seriously. "My Daemon workers and I are constantly tending to the lighting above their shelves, the incense burning, the locations of each box, the chemical treatments of each box, and much more complicated measures we take to insure the souls are kept in repose."

"Stacia wasn't kept in repose," I muttered.



“No. She wasn’t. She seems calmer now, but I’ll keep an eye on her,” Athan said coolly. “We need to talk about her, though. And we need to talk about you. And we need to talk about your mother.”

Dimitri and I responded with simultaneous questions in different forms.

“My mother?” I asked.

“Delia?” he asked.

“Your mother, Delia,” Athan answered. “She’s in the study.”

“Why?” Dimitri and I asked in sync again.

“Let’s go find out.”

As we followed him through winding dark hallway after winding dark stairway, Dimitri pressed Athan with questions. “Athan, where was Stacia hiding? I was looking for a bug or a leech. I found nothing. Was she a tick? Do we need to still do something to remove whatever was clinging to Danica?”

“I thought you two had figured it out when you brought her to me,” Athan returned, sounding genuinely surprised at the question. “After all, it makes so much sense. Danica is, herself, a liminal being.”

The statement made me twitch, almost in the way Stacia had made me convulse.

“You mean, I’m like a crow or a bear or a cat or a snake...supernatural souls can...use me... get inside me. I’m a vestibule?”

“You’re more than that, Danny, but I do feel stupid for not seeing it.” Dimitri let out a defeated and agitated sigh. “You’re part human and part vampire. Of course you’re part life and part death. You’re the epitome of a liminal existence.”

I thought about it. I guessed we were all thinking about it because it grew silent as well as dark as we kept making blind turns through hallways until I broke the silence with my realization, “So, when I killed that snake after it bit me, it was Stacia. But instead of sending her soul straight back to you, I was close enough to her that she somehow made it into me. She made me her next vestibule.”

“That sounds right to me,” Athan agreed.

“Do you think they’d all figured it out, Athan? Do you think they all knew that she could be the ultimate vestibule and potential weapon for hurting herself, in turn hurting me?” Dimitri asked, sounding less confident than usual.

“If you must know, I will visit their souls and see if I can find out. My guess would be that they worked together, but were ultimately selfish about what they would each get to do. I think that they did originally just set out to hurt Danica because they knew it would hurt you. That’s why they all went after her while she was alone. When you were together, I’d bet Jonah wanted to take you on and Stacia had already been close enough to Danica to sense her potential as a vestibule and form her own plan for vengeance.” Athan finished his last sentence quickly as he opened a door to a lighted room.

## CHAPTER XII THE TREATY

*Perspective: Danica*

The door opened to the study where my mother sat on an antique looking couch with wooden arms. Her perfect skin was well lit with the light of a hand-painted lamp. She seemed to be using the light to read a book she'd pulled off one of the many shelves that lined the walls.

She looked up from her book as we entered the room and greeted us, "Dimitri, darling. Danica, dear. It's good to see you both alive. You never know with this one," she pointed to Athan with disgust.

"See, Delia. They're here. I told you I had not harmed her. Now, tell me what you came for," Athan commanded coldly.

"I told you. I came here for Danica. Her father was very worried and she needs to be starting school soon," my mother remarked innocently, as if that was truly all she cared about.

"That's not happening, Delia. She's my employee now. So, whatever internship you've convinced Preston she's taking with you and the Dominions who wish to destroy her, well... you can forget about it, Red." Athan spoke to my mother as if they were old rivals with nicknames and everything.

My mother tossed the book in her hands across the room and stood up. "You are despicable, Leviathan. Your powers do not give you the right to invade everyone's personal thoughts."

“But they give me the power to,” he retorted.

She took a few steps closer to Athan. “It *is* happening. Danica will not be in your jurisdiction forever, you abominable monster. And if you’ve read my thoughts, you know why.”

She was obviously livid, but Athan just seemed annoyed as he responded, “Preston is not going to create what you want him to create. He’s not going to make Danica human. It hasn’t happened. It won’t happen. It doesn’t matter what research institution you place him in. It doesn’t matter what his research facilities look like. And if you keep her from my employment and steal her away for tests to undermine me, you and your precious Dominions can consider it breaking the treaty.”

My mother turned around quickly and paced away from him back toward the couch.

“What’s that?” he asked her.

“You know I didn’t say anything,” she returned viciously.

“But you thought it. And you shouldn’t have. They shouldn’t have told you. Why did they tell you?”

“Because they needed me to know I was working under the pressure of a deadline,” she whispered angrily.

“Is anyone going to invite us to the conversation? I mean, I could read my mom’s mind, but for one thing, it is a bitter and scary place that I choose not to enter and secondly, it’s rude to Dimitri,” I chimed in.

Athan laughed. “It’s sweet how you two look out for each other. You need to continue to do so. Your mother has just informed me that a treaty has been broken between the Daemons and the Dominions.”

“How so?” Dimitri asked.

“Do you want to tell them or should I?” Athan asked my mother.

“It is a matter of opinion as to whether or not the treaty was actually broken. No one actually harmed or did anything with your souls. None was let out or taken,” she replied.

“What she means to tell you is that, as I had suspected, neither I, nor any of my working Daemons made the mistake of putting Jonah, Edgar, and Stacia on a shelf together. All that paperwork you saw downstairs, Danica, were files and histories of each soul, which you can imagine are long and tedious when it comes to supernaturals. It would have been an egregious error by someone to have placed three souls with a connected vengeful history in the same general vicinity from one another. There’s no repose in an environment like that,” Athan explained quickly.

“So how did they get together?” I asked.

“There was an interference and a break-in by a member of the Dominions, according to your mother,” Athan answered.

“Don’t be so dramatic. My thought wasn’t that clear. They made it sound like they might have had something to do with it just so I would put a rush on things before they took dealing with Danica into their own hands,” she retorted.

“I am so sick of everyone dealing with me! In every sense of the word!” I lashed out.

“What does it mean?” Dimitri asked, suddenly as solemn as he had been in the car ride over.

No one answered at first. I stepped closer to Dimitri, placed his hand in mine, and asked quietly but seriously, having sensed the grave energy in the room, “What are you asking, Dimitri? Are you asking what it means if what my mom thinks is true—what it means if the treaty has been broken?”

“Yes, Danny. That’s what I’m asking,” he said, giving my hand a tight squeeze.

Still, no answer came from my mom or Athan.

“Well, answer him already! Please.” I hated the silence and how tense Dimitri was.

“It means war,” Athan spoke finally.

## CONCLUSION

Danica and Dimitri have completed their mission for Athan and returned the escaped souls, Stacia and Jonah, to their place in Hell. After she was perilously possessed by Stacia, a new aspect of Danica's hybrid nature was discovered. Her existence is also of a liminal nature, a position between life and death, so she can be used as a vestibule for souls just as the creatures in the story were used. Such a potentiality is likely to complicate Athan's plans for Danica, but it is not his most pressing concern at the end of the story. Once Danica and Dimitri are safe in Athan's palace, they are told Delia has been waiting for them. Delia's presence stirs up new trouble once Athan learns from her that the Dominions have broken a sacred treaty, which is an act of defiance that calls for war. The war will take place in the continuation of the book series.

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